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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000077

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SUBJECT: FCT MINISTER'S UPDATE ON PDP ELECTION PREPARATION

REF: ABUJA 0061

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b & d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: FCT Minister el-Rufai called on Ambassador January 11 to provide a political update. He stressed the importance of the upcoming elections and said the PDP remained popular, but needed to exhibit "greater humility" to win voter support. He commented that PDP candidates Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan were "the only two governors that could scale the EFCC hurdle" and that President Obasanjo was now busy "selling his reforms and his candidates to the PDP." Dismissing Vice President Atiku, he said that the election was a two-party race between ANPP's Buhari and PDP's Yar'Adua, but that the PDP's "funding mechanisms and structures" would carry the day. Off to a slow start, he assured the Ambassador that progress towards free and fair elections was "on track." His comments, while sticking to the PDP line in general, left an impression that he personally was opening up the Buhari issue, perhaps in consideration of his own future post-Obasanjo. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Minister of the Federal Capital Territory Nasir el-Rufai requested a meeting with the Ambassador to provide an update on Nigeria's political scene. He stressed the importance of the upcoming elections to Nigeria's development and outlined the need for an end to rigging and corruption in the process. He said the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) remained popular, but needed to exhibit "greater humility" to win voter support. According to Rufai, Nigerians will support the PDP and Yar'Adua because President Obasanjo's economic reforms are "popular" throughout the country and Nigerians want them to continue. "They are just somehow tired of the President," he said. He also posited that the PDP needed to show "greater humility" to the public to ensure that Nigerians believe that the elections are credible.

Yar'Adua and Goodluck

13. (C) Rufai said that the PDP's candidates, Governors Umaru Yar'Adua from Katsina and Goodluck Jonathan from Bayelsa, were "thrown up by the party." He characterized Yar'Adua as "clean" and someone who has managed his state well. According to el-Rufai, Yar'Adua was reluctant, but

acquiesced at the request of the President. On his own candidacy, el-Rufai said he had never wanted the Presidency, but others had promoted him. "When President Obasanjo called me in to ask about my intentions, I told him that I would do it, but that I had not campaigned for the position," el-Rufai explained. According to el-Rufai, the President agreed with him and told him that there were "other bridges to cross" before el-Rufai was ready. The Minister said that the Presidency has been working with Yar'Adua "from the beginning," but they had wanted to keep his candidacy a secret so that others could not frustrate his prospects. He

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described Yar'Adua as an "odd fellow" - an introvert who rarely traveled and said that Yar'Adua had kidney problems "in the past." He claimed that the Governor had not visited Lagos "for many years," and said that some think Yar'Adua's last trip to Lagos was in 1991. Rufai said he had known Yar'Adua for over 25 years and that Yar'Adua had shown himself to be an independent thinker since his decision to oppose politically both his father and his late brother, Shehu Yar'Adua, in the 1979 elections.

14. (C) The Minister said the PDP leadership had pushed for Rivers Governor Peter Odili as the Vice Presidential candidate, but that Odili, along with Governors Makarfi (Kaduna) and Mu'azu (Bauchi), face "integrity issues" at the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), thus eliminating them from contention. Yar'Adua and Jonathan "were the only two governors that could have cleared the EFCC hurdle," Rufai said. Further, he said that Gov. Goodluck Jonathan of Bayelsa was the only candidate that met Obasanjo's guidelines - honest and Ijaw.

Party Politics

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15. (C) The Minister claimed that the PDP has a strong candidate but that its "funding mechanisms and structures" are the things that will ensure its win. Rufai pointed out that the PDP is "not really a political party" but rather like a franchise operation with 37 branches. He said that the Governors control party structures in their respective states and were virtually independent of the National Headquarter's control. Rufai worried that PDP has internal problems and its membership is currently in a bit of disarray. As a result of the Party conventions, el-Rufai said that 15 governors, 50 senators and 200 members of the House of Representatives remain "disgruntled" for a variety of reasons. "We do not know why sitting members of the National Assembly failed to secure re-nomination and we (the Presidency) do not know how that happened," he claimed. He highlighted the fact that one of the most important issues facing the PDP was "reconciliation" of the disparate groups of PDP politicians. The Minister complained that "everyone expects the PDP to rig" and the Government wanted to make sure enough international monitors were in place to keep the "opposition" from "setting us up as riggers."

16. (C) Rufai said the reconciliation was not only important in order to win the elections, but also to ensure the passage of "a lot of important legislation" coming in the next few months. Further, he said, the President wanted to keep the National Assembly from doing "something silly" like impeaching the President. Rufai commented that the impeachment process was already under way but dismissed the likelihood that it could succeed.

17. (C) Another task facing the PDP, el-Rufai said, was to "sell President Obasanjo's reforms" to the party membership. Until now, he continued, Nigerians view the reforms as the President's and not the party's. Rufai said that the PDP "retreat" (reftel) was conceived to achieve this goal. He

said that the President wanted the PDP to be a political party like one in the West. He said that either a U.K., a U.S. or a Thai political consulting firm would be hired on a "multi-million dollar" contract to make sure the PDP's campaign was credible.

Other Candidates

18. (C) Rufai said that 2007 would produce "a first in Nigeria's history" - both the opposition All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) and the PDP would have honest candidates on the ballot. He characterized ANPP candidate Muhammadu Buhari as "a strong candidate" and one that Nigerians view as both credible and honest. Rufai claimed to be in "regular contact" with Buhari and said that the race for the Presidency was "between the ANPP and the PDP." He dismissed the chances of Vice President Atiku Abubakar, his own former mentor. The Minister commented that there had been disagreement within the Presidency over declaring the Vice President's seat vacant. "We wanted to wait for a court decision," he said. Rufai claimed not to know what Atiku's next step might be, but opined confidently that "INEC will surely disqualify him."

On Elections

19. (C) The Minister acknowledged that there were problems at first with the voters registration, but declared that "everything is now on track." He dismissed the census as "merely a distraction," saying that questions of redistricting cannot be addressed in time for the elections. He did register a complaint about the census, pointing the the 1.4 million residents of the Abuja area as grossly low. Rufai said that his own estimate of between 5 and 7 million residents was arrived at through a comprehensive aerial survey and the analysis of the pictures. Still, el-Rufai went on, he was hesitant to complain loudly since "it is my government that released the figures."

110. (C) COMMENT: The Minister exhibited his usual self-confident demeanor and was never at a loss for words on any subject. His assessment of the PDP's biggest challenges was clear-eyed, identifying PDP arrogance and party cohesion as two of the biggest problems. Aside from his propounding

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the PDP party line, though, was an undercurrent. His mention of Odili, Makarfi and Mu'azu as having "integrity problems" with the EFCC serves both the PDP interest in bolstering Yar'Adua's viability as a candidate and, interestingly, his own reported efforts to replace Yar'Adua in the event it became necessary (although he did not say so.) His platitudes for Buhari, though were equally interesting. It may be that, seeing an end to his own career in politics, he is seeking to soften his own landing in the event the PDP is not successful in the upcoming elections.

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